CIRCLE OF FIRE

The delicate, alien landscape changed slowly around them, revealing the arch of a doorway, the unhuman lines of wall or house. Rubble crunched under their boots. Kirk paused at a crest.

"Another village. Comparatively untouched."

"It seems so."

"Have the survey teams--?"

"No."

He went down on his knee to trace the pattern of a mosaic. Cool, enigmatic. "We'll camp here tonight."

"Yes."

Spock set up the basic explorer's camp, a tent, some supplies, on the edge of a marble clearing. Kirk looked for runes. He recorded those he found, in the waning light.

"Starfleet is desirous of obtaining the secrets of these ruins. An instantaneous transport-weapon system--"

"Yes."

Write his own ticket, Komack said. An admiralty? Perhaps.

Did he want it?

Perhaps.

"--should prove a psoitive asset in your career--"

"That's none of your concern, Commander."

The alien planes regarded him. "Sir," Spock said inclining his head.

He'd been--irritable--with Spock lately. Watching him. Silly. He had shared more things with Spock than his own brother. But-- The memories seemed futile now.

Alien.

"Sheelth, Captain?" Spock held the oddly shaped bottle. Kirk nodded. He'd grown to like the Vulcan wine lately.

He did not touch Spock's hand as the Vulcan gave him the goblet. He did not touch Spock at all.

They ate, field rations, over the atomic lamp. No insects came. The wine was faintly warm.

"I was sorry to hear of your parents' death." He spoke abruptly, mild tartness in his throat.

Spock looked away. "It was their time."

"Still--wine and a ceremonial robe as funeral gifts? I don't understand."

"Custom. They will help determine who will be the next Head of Family."

"You?"

"There are cousins.... I am P'rt na Cellya--journeyman, you would say--but Head of Family must be Master. I must...prove.... Drink." He pushed the bottle to Kirk. Kirk flinched; the goblet, an archeologist's treasure, nearly fell.

Spock looked at him. He stood and moved away.

Kirk poured himself more wine. It made him sleep, and when he slept he could not think. He was sleepy now, in the dusky blue-green. He stifled a yawn, leaning back against a marble bench.

"Curious," Spock was saying, examining a mosaic wall. "The repetition of the same four symbolic elements."

"Fire and earth. Water and air," Kirk whispered, or thought.

"On Vulcan, they would be the star and the spiral. Line and circle. The four elements which make up form in Cellya."

Cellya. A Vulcan philosophy of some kind...he'd read-- His head was light, his hands and feet warm. He wanted to sleep. "Which--" he muttered.

"Am I?" Spock looked straight at him, smooth, self-contained. "I am the circle. You, the flame."

It happened then. He remembered, and breath came out of him in a soft, despairing exhalation. But his limbs were disconnected and nothing in him moved but the fire, beginning to lick inside his bones.

Spock bent over him, his voice earnest. "If I can force the totality, past, present and future, I will learn the secret you need--and prove myself Master." He explained, every time. "I cannot, - alone. I cannot control-- You have power. I need it. Captain--you would approve, if--"

The soft sound from Kirk's throat had nothing to do with his mind.

"It will help you advance in the service--" Power. Komack had said.... Had he? The shadows flickered across Spock's face strangely, clouds fleeing the stars beyond, and suddenly he was unsure what Komack had said. The flames enveloped his fingers and toes, bright enough to see. He ached.

"Spock--"

Spock pulled him gently upright to take off his clothes. Each touch moved Kirk, helplessly. The hot blood thundered through his skin. Nerves alive. Needing.

"Sheelth has unforseen effects in humans," Spock murmured, fingers tracing delicately.

"Spock--" It was forced from him. "Please.."

"Lie back." Spock put him down, gently. "Wait." He doused the lamp, laid his own clothes aside, unfolded and donned the robe. Movements half-seen in the darkness. Too far away to touch.

He would have begged, if he had had the strength, he would have pleaded....

Spock, a sane part of his mind thought, in distress and horror. No. No.

Spock lifted his hands and all the human's words ended.

"Circle. One-sided and whole," Spock said. Or thought. Or was. "Complete. Future, Present. Past...." He took Kirk's need and used it, drawing power in a shower of fireballs, draining him.

Using me, Kirk thought. Use me, please...."

No....